

PRACTICAL EXERCISES • NUTRITION • MINDFULNESS • LIFESTYLE & WELLNESS

YOGATM MAGAZINE

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Spring, Sunshine & Energy

**DEEP
RELAXATION**

THROUGH YOGA

**4 SELF CARE
YOGA
PRACTICES**

**SUCCESSFUL
WAYS**

**TO DETOX YOUR
BODY WITH
LASTING RESULTS**

**ENERGY BOOSTING
YOGA FLOW
FOR SPRING**

SERIES

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MEMOIRS OF A *Yogi*



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WHY HOME WORKING CAN BE A REAL PAIN IN THE NECK & BACK

HOW YOGA-BASED PRACTICES CAN HELP

BWY SPECIAL FEATURE

Words: Anji Gopal

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a collective shift to working from home. Two years on, 30% of the UK workforce are still working remotely at least once a week, with lingering concerns of overcrowded transport and offices. While many enjoy the benefits of zero-commute and extra cuddle time with pets and partners, there's a potential downside: new or worsening back and neck pain.

Even prior to the pandemic, low back pain was the leading cause of workplace absence, affecting some 20-40% of adults. Now, with the NHS under pressure, osteopaths and other manual therapists are noticing a steady

stream of home-workers seeking help with their low back and neck pain.

As an Osteopath, yoga teacher and back care course module leader for the British Wheel of Yoga, I've spent years studying and working with patients who have back pain. From an evolutionary perspective, our bodies are made to work and bear weight. The spine is inherently strong and can withstand a whole range of physical movement, the demands of modern life included. But, the spine is not designed for stasis.



SITTING IS A MODERN PHENOMENON

The change to home-working means that many people are sitting for hours at a time and moving relatively little. My patients report that after hours spent in front of a screen, they then 'unwind' by sitting on the sofa. It's no wonder that the static tissues are complaining!

Muscles, joints and bones need blood to flow, so movement is essential in keeping them strong and flexible. While the spine as a structure is inherently strong, sitting and slumping brings the weight into the joints at the base of the spine. Compression of these joints can often be the cause of discomfort.

STRESS EXACERBATES PAIN

Stress impacts our spinal health. The last three years have been hugely challenging at many levels, from our personal stories to national and international events. The world feels less safe today - and this has a knock-on effect on all aspects of our health. I'm seeing many more patients with clenched jaws, a key contributor to neck pain, and patients who are having trouble sleeping, which reduces the amount of healing rest their bodies get.

COVID CAN CONTRIBUTE TO BACK PAIN

As we now know, Covid-19 is not just a respiratory disease. Some of the Omicron symptoms include myalgia and arthralgia (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fphys.2022.813924/full#B90>). Coughing can put strain on the neck and low back and being bed bound weakens the muscles.

YOGA AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL FOR SPINAL SUPPORT

The good news is that yoga-based practices can be helpful. I run an evidence-informed Yoga-based programme in healthcare that brings

simple & powerful practices to people with low back pain and starts to unwind some of these issues.

My patients and students see great benefits from yoga, with many reporting improvements in pain, increased mobility and less stress as a result of their practice. The research evidence for Yoga as a therapeutic tool is continually building.

Stretching, strengthening, moving gently, as well as improving breathwork and relaxation techniques can all help. Rather than using yoga as a performance of acrobatic *asana*, yoga when used therapeutically, can really support your spine.

There is a lot of strength in simplicity and it is often the smaller movements that have a deeper impact and it is more likely that we will do them!

Here are my top five tips. No yoga mat is required, and I recommend that all of the practices are performed in a pain-free range. Please see your GP or qualified medical practitioner if you have back or neck pain that isn't resolving, or if you are unsure of starting new exercises.



1 MAKE A STAND AGAINST SITTING

The average adult sits for nine hours a day. Sitting in one position for a long time stops muscles from working in the way they were designed to as they need movement!

Did you know that there is no 'perfect posture'? In my experience, the best posture is one that MOVES. So, sit, stand and walk around whilst conducting your business. Set a timer for the last five minutes of each hour and just GET UP. Dance, jog on the spot, go for a loo break, walk downstairs and check the post. Just move!

If you are sitting for a long time, I recommend putting a folded towel or yoga block under your bottom - try sitting with the bottom higher than the knees. Does it help?

2 SHOULDER ROLLS - MOVE THE MUSCLES THAT SUPPORT YOUR NECK

Shoulder rolls loosen up tight muscles in the neck and upper back, two areas most often associated with poor head posture and neck ache.

- Stand (or sit, if you must!) comfortably and roll your right shoulder up towards your right ear and then roll it down your back.
- Then do the same with the left shoulder.

- Alternate between the two
- Go SLOWLY & don't hold your breath! Imagine you are trying to scrape something sticky off your earlobe and you can't use your hands.
- Make sure you are rolling backwards not forwards and repeat 5 times each side.
- Finish with a shake of the arms and enjoy your relaxed shoulders.

ALL FOURS TO CHILD'S POSE - BALASANA

3

This dynamic sequence releases pressure along the spine, increases spinal flexibility and abdominal strength. It helps to loosen the joints and muscles in the back.

- Hop off your chair, get on the floor on all fours and find a neutral spine position – engage your belly towards the spine very slightly.
- Inhale and as you exhale, take your bottom towards your heels. As you inhale, return forward to all fours.
- Continue to travel forward and back, inhaling and exhaling as you move. Feel a gentle stretch through the sides and in your lower back, deepening each time
- Repeat 5-10 times, finishing with the bottom on the heels for 3 breaths then come up slowly.



4

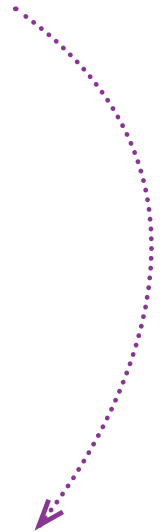
CHAIR LUNGE - ANJANEASANA

This simple lunge - think moving forward not collapsing down - this stretches the hip flexors and releases tension from too much sitting. Strengthening these sleepy and tight muscles helps surrounding tissues of the low back.

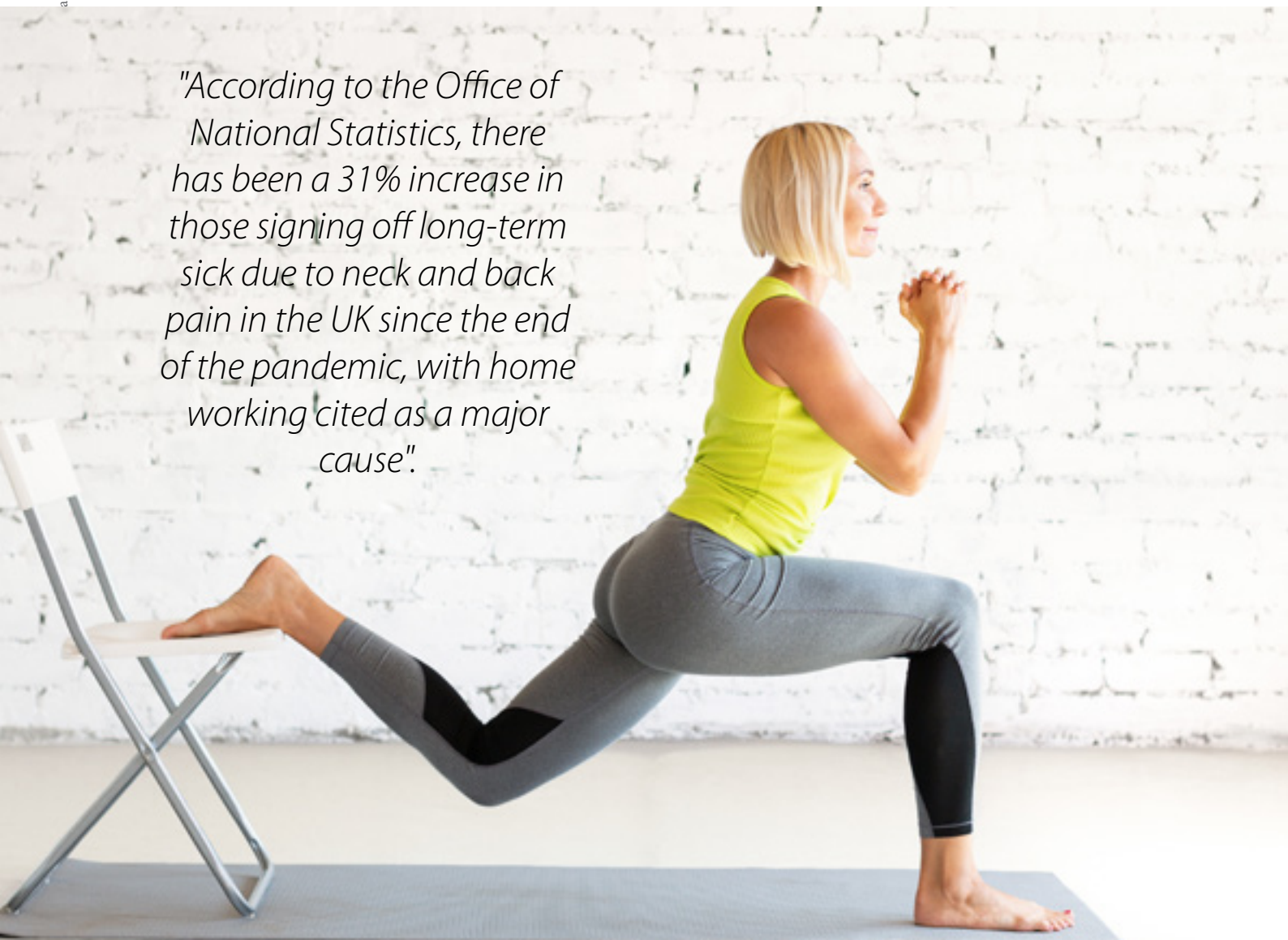
- Stand facing a chair – a dining chair or sofa will work. Only use your desk chair if it DOESN'T have wheels!
- Place your hands on your hips and step your right foot onto the middle of the chair seat.
- Breathe in and as you breathe out, move forward into your

hips until you feel a stretch through the front of your left thigh. Keep pressing your left heel down. Hold the posture for 3 breaths.

- Keep your belly back towards the spine and breathe deep. Resist the temptation to sink down and collapse.
- Step out slowly – use the chair back to hold onto if needed. Then repeat with the left foot on the chair.
- IF the chair seat is too high, pop your foot on a couple of blocks or the lowest stair.



"According to the Office of National Statistics, there has been a 31% increase in those signing off long-term sick due to neck and back pain in the UK since the end of the pandemic, with home working cited as a major cause".



DESK DOWNWARD DOG - ARDHA UTTANASANA

Helps ease and stretch the tight back muscles and hamstrings that can cause low back discomfort by lengthening and decompressing the entire spine. It is great if you don't have time to unroll a mat!

- Stand facing your desk or table with your feet hip-width apart
- Sweep your arms up alongside your ears, then bend forward at your waist with bent knees

- Place your hands lightly on the tabletop and stretch your hips back, keeping your knees bent so your spine can lengthen
- Keep your belly drawing up to the spine and don't let your head and neck drop down
- Enjoy 5 breaths here, not pushing or pulling but lengthening the spine gently in two directions
- Walk forward to come out and stand tall with your feet planted for a few breaths.

To finish the practice, you can do a few more shoulder rolls and shake your hands and feet a few times before going back to your work.



Anji Gopal, Osteopath, Yoga Teacher and Yoga Teacher Trainer for the British Wheel of Yoga.

Anji Gopal is a London-based Osteopath, Yoga Teacher and expert in using Yoga as an evidenced-informed intervention to help with back pain. Over the last 15 years, she has built an area of clinical expertise in Yoga for BackCare and in 2016 established and has been running an innovative yoga-based programme for back pain patients in a London hospital. She is also a yoga teacher trainer who runs the BackCare training module for the British Wheel of Yoga - equipping Yoga teachers to share this work and help everyone with back pain.
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